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The 'New' Media and Politics: What Does the Future Hold?

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Beyond new technological advances, what makes the 'new' media new? I contend that the chief change brought about by the new media is the empowerment of media users. They now have greater control over incoming and outgoing messages, and their ability to contact literally millions of people has grown exponentially. These changes have sharply increased the need for new communications policies. I also argue that, despite an explosion of available information, the political information diet of average Americans will remain meager.

The Changing Media Landscape

The Growing Information Supply

During the closing decades of the twentieth century, over-the-air networks and cable television systems have multiplied, adding hundreds of broadcasting channels. Satellites carry vast numbers of radio and television programs beamed to customers' backyard satellite dishes. Senders of political messages now have available scores of inexpensive channels for sending customized political messages to diverse

audiences. This is likely to improve the electoral chances of minority candidates and minority parties who can readily tailor their messages to the concerns of selected audiences. The needs and interests of specific audiences, such as groups differing in ethnicity, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation, or groups with special concerns related to their vocations and avocations are more likely to be addressed. Customizing also makes information transmission more effective than when depersonalized news is directed to heterogeneous mass audiences. Computers equipped with modems allow information seekers to gain access to the Internet system, which now carries a huge array of politically relevant messages. Other potentially rich sources for information that computer-literate individuals can tap are electronic mail networks and bulletin boards.

Unfortunately, while a great deal of effort has been devoted to creating new channels for carrying information, attention to the quality and diversity of the political content carried by these channels has lagged. When it comes to serious political information, choices offered by various channels, for the most part, amount to surface,

rather than substance distinctions. Impartial, analytical information about public figures and public policy issues that would improve citizens' ability to appraise the political scene is all-too-scarce. Despite an explosion of politically oriented Home Pages on the World Wide Web, surprisingly little has been added that is genuinely new or that enriches the information supply beyond the offerings of the far smaller circle of 'old' media.

Media User Empowerment

The new media have freed users from the tyranny of the time-clock. Twenty-four-hour news channels and computer news sources now make news available around the clock, rather than at times dictated by media delivery schedules. The rapid spread of home computers has increased the size of audiences who can reach computerized data at times of their choice. Video recorders allow average Americans to preserve particular information packages for use wherever, whenever, and as often as they wish. Eighty-five percent of America's households have at least one video recorder to selectively tape programs or play rented tapes. People can also buy political information

stored on audio and video tapes and on CD-ROM.

The new media have also eased the control of professional journalists over the framing and interpretation of the news. Thanks to broadcasts of ongoing events, ready availability of full texts of messages, and interactive talk show broadcasts, people now can watch many happenings in real time, often in their entirety. While the initial choice of events to be broadcast is still reserved for journalists, the second step—editing and framing a story—can now be in news consumers' hands. CNN or C-Span viewers, for example, can make their own interpretations and draw their own conclusions while watching live broadcasts. Subscribers to on-line computer services can download full texts, including pictures, into their home computers. They can edit such information to suit their taste by adding, combining, or deleting data.

For those who like to ask newsmakers their own questions, numerous talk-show programs offer excellent opportunities. Politicians and media audiences like talk shows because most hosts, unlike peevish Washington reporters, allow their guests to present their arguments in their own words and from their own perspectives. Talk shows provide prized opportunities for direct interaction between ordinary folk and political leaders. The candidates' ample use of the talk show format during the 1992 campaign loosened the grip of traditional media over candidate messages. Audiences for talk shows were huge. Bill Clinton's one-hour appearance on *Donahue* was seen by nearly 8 million viewers. Television appearances on Larry King's show were seen by an estimated 2.5 million people. Candidates even appeared on rock-music-oriented MTV where a 1992 candidate forum attracted over 3 million—presumably elusive young American voters in the 18–34 age group. Campaigning on these programs also had a large echo effect. The standard mass media and individual pundits widely reported remarks made during talk shows, thus rais-

ing their profile and political significance.

New Political Pressure Tools

Finally, thanks to the new electronic networks, individuals can now inform people worldwide and mobilize them for political action. Individuals and groups eager to spread their political messages no longer depend on media coverage to publicize their appeals. In cyber-

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space, a single private citizen can address hundreds of thousands of people via computer from the privacy of his or her home. Additionally, electronic publishing on home computers has vastly boosted the numbers of newsletters that various social, professional, and trade communities can distribute.

By mid-1995, more than 25 million people in the United States—14% of the adult population—were connected to the Internet; worldwide audiences make the cyberspace community much larger. These numbers have been growing rapidly. However, there is likely to be a growth ceiling because the pool of computer-literate consumers is limited by educational, economic, and technical constraints. Projecting current user figures into the future, based on the demographic characteristics of the computer literate population, it seems unlikely that the majority of Ameri-

cans will be cyberspace users in the foreseeable future.

The Current Impact of New Media

What difference have the new media made thus far in the political lives of average Americans and what does the future portend? Unfortunately, information transmission capacity has vastly exceeded use. While available food for political thought has grown, despite much overlap and redundancy, the appetite for it and the capacity to consume it remain limited. The ceiling for the demand for political information has already been reached for most people. The interest in talk shows recorded during the 1992 presidential campaign does not represent a major permanent spike in political interest and news consumption. Rather, it reflects a revived appetite for political fare when appealing formats compete with the current disliked offerings.

Unlike talk shows, political information available in cyberspace presents major challenges to the intellectual skills of information consumers. The fact that millions of American adults still are functionally illiterate when it comes to reading printed materials does not bode well for looking to a future when computer literacy will reach 90%. In practice, cyberspace riches are available only to individuals with superior education and financial resources. These are the publics who already participate far more in politics than their less privileged fellow citizens. As technology continues to evolve, the knowledge gap between the information privileged and the information underclass is likely to grow. Since knowledge means power, an information-deprived class is likely to suffer other power deprivations. It cannot readily avail itself of Internet resources that empower interest groups to use the information superhighway to organize and lobby for their causes. Hence the influence of educationally and economically privileged groups on politics, which has always been substantial, may be greatly enhanced. The end result may be a more fragmented

polity, making political gridlock more likely.

Reinventing Communications Policy

The multiplication of media, especially the growth of public computer networks, requires a complete rethinking of the scope and purposes of federal regulation of broadcast media. The Communications Act of 1934 was passed because transmission facilities were scarce. Congress wanted to make certain that the limited numbers of available broadcast channels were parceled out equitably and served broad public interests. Printed media were left largely outside the regulatory scheme. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects their independence from government intrusion. Fifty years later the basic regulatory framework remains intact although its ostensible *raison d'être*—the scarcity of transmission channels—has largely vanished. Government leaders and industry leaders, aware of the transformation of the communication delivery systems, agree that the 1934 Act must be revised. But there is no agreement on specific plans. Pressures for easing regulations are balanced by pressures to continue and even increase government controls.

Regulatory Options

If the Communications Act of 1934 is put to well-deserved rest, the government has several basic policy options for dealing with the new media system. It can play a hands-off, *laissez-faire* role, allowing the system to grow according to the push and pull of market forces, with only minor controls to assure that the system operates effectively. Regulation would be limited to safeguards to protect national security, maintain social norms and privacy, and to guard intellectual property rights.

Media channels can also be treated as common carriers, like the telephone or rail and bus lines. Common carrier status makes transmission facilities available to

everyone on a first-come, first-served basis. Congress, the FCC and various local governments like the common carrier concept that has been adopted for communications satellites. While court decisions make the power of Congress to impose common carrier features on the communication industry questionable, these decisions do not constrain state and local authorities.

As a third option, the government can confer public trustee status on communication enterprises. This status grants media owners full control over access to their channels, but requires them to meet certain public service obligations. Examples are equal time allotments to proponents and opponents of controversial public policies, or channel time for public and government broadcasts, including broadcasts serving public education, public safety, and medical and social services. The rationale for conferring trustee status on broadcasters lies in the potentially crucial impact that mass media have on American society. Trustee status has strong support in the United States and much of the world. Although it runs counter to the basic philosophy on which the American system was built, namely, that communication should be entirely free from government control, it appears to be the front-runner among the options available as a framework for future communications policy.

Paying the Piper

Whether mass communication facilities are treated like any private enterprise, like a common carrier, or like a trustee, their costs have to be paid. There are several possibilities. The costs can be born by advertisers, by audience payments, by government subsidies, or by various combinations of these funding sources. Currently, advertisers pay the largest share of the nation's mass communication budget, although these costs are passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices. But advertisers' share is shrinking as multiplication

of information channels splits audiences into smaller slices that are uneconomical targets for many advertisers.

What seems to be emerging in the new era is a system that is predominantly supported by audience payments. A major social drawback of such a system, which framers of new policies need to consider, is the plight of poor families who cannot afford many of the specialized programs that they need. Inequalities could be reduced through government subsidies but, given budgetary constraints, heavy government subsidies are unlikely. Shortage of public funds also means that the private sector will continue to finance the development of advanced communication networks. The likely consequence is continued emphasis on light entertainment fare that has mass appeal and attracts advertising dollars or user fees, rather than more serious programming.

Hazards in the Information Marketplace

The new technologies have exacerbated a number of serious threats to major public and private interests. The protection of confidential information ranks high on that list. Safeguarding the secrecy of confidential public and private information as well as individual privacy presents major challenges in societies eager to preserve open access to data bases. Despite security codes, astute computer users can assemble scattered bits of information very quickly to gain insights into situations that should remain confidential. Current laws are inadequate to safeguard individual and collective privacy. If they are not revised, the information superhighway may become an Orwellian nightmare where individuals and organizations are exposed to every traveller's inquisitiveness.

The flurry of mergers and acquisitions approved by the government during the 1990s has raised concerns about excessive concentration of control over the public's information supply. Media entrepreneurs who dominate a large

share of the information marketplace may become mouthpieces for special interests, and financial returns may become their programming lodestar. Many of the megamedia companies involved in these mergers are giant transnational corporations that exercise vast influence over the information tendered to the world's publics. This information shapes important economic and political issues throughout the world. Fortunately, excessive concentration, which leaves the field largely to the giants, has been partly balanced by the lush growth of specialized media, such as local cable television geared to serving particular community interests. Still, current merger policies raise worrisome issues.

Regulations to prevent inappropriate uses of the airways also need to be updated to cope with new problems. Currently, anarchy reigns in the fast-growing web of public and private computer networks that links millions of people around the globe. This state of affairs has allowed crooks to pursue get-rich-quick schemes to defraud the unwary among the hundreds of thousands of people exposed to these messages. Pornography flourishes in places where children can access it readily, while self-appointed censors hunt down messages that they consider offensive and destroy them. However, more effective government rules and regulations to guard against criminal and other antisocial behaviors in cyberspace are not enough. They must be supplemented by a new, more responsible user ethic.

The Outlook for Progress

A look at communication technologies tells us what is possible, but it does not indicate what is likely to happen, particularly in the short run. A number of barriers block the full development of new mass communication technologies. They are political, economic, and social, along with typical patterns of resistance to major innovations

and the tendency to adapt innovations to perpetuate rather than replace old procedures.

In the political arena, partisan and bureaucratic barriers must be surmounted. Many new developments never get off the ground because they are opposed for partisan reasons, or because bureaucracies impose too many regulations to guard against abuses. Frequently, unrealistically high standards are prescribed, raising costs beyond economically feasible levels. The situation is complicated even further when state and local rules are piled on top of federal regulations. Setting requirements for public service and for open-access channels and for service for outlying areas requires controversial political decisions about matters apt to be very expensive. In sparsely populated areas, for example, costs of information services may exceed profits temporarily or permanently. Communication technologies involve large investments; their sudden obsolescence when regulatory agencies approve new technologies may become a crushing financial burden.

Early entrants into a technological field often develop a squatter's mentality about their rights such as access to certain broadcast frequencies or exclusive use of particular technologies. Latecomers to the mass communication field, on the other hand, are eager to reallocate facilities and to introduce even more advanced technologies. If their requests are granted, proven technologies may be sacrificed to new claimants whose prospects for success are uncertain. Meanwhile, technology continues its advance, raising fresh problems that further delay the green light for implementing new systems.

Whatever directions new communications policies take, they will have a profound impact on the directions of American politics generally. Unfortunately, the structure for making communications policy remains fragmented at all government levels and ill-suited to deal with existing problems, to say

nothing of those that must be anticipated. Narrow, short-term issues are addressed, while far-reaching, long-term problems are ignored. Government leaders are unwilling to enter the thickets of communications policy making when so many other battles must be fought. Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which oversees the information superhighway, thus far have done little beyond preliminary discussions and studies to cope with the flood of new problems that recent developments have raised. The FCC has not even tackled crucial issues of standardization of technologies so that investments in equipment and training can be kept moderate.

The ultimate prognosis remains clouded. There are bright dreams of high quality diverse information easily available to all travellers on the information superhighway. There are forebodings that the new highway will turn out to be a clone of older routes where the same dreary information cargo makes up most of the freight. And there are nightmares about gridlock, government and private spying on unsuspecting travellers, and propaganda barrages that obscure important facts. Which scenario will emerge? Much hinges on the willingness of industry and government leaders, as well as average citizens, to take control of communications issues to ensure the developments of a sound information system. A do-nothing policy that leaves developments to chance is irresponsible and dangerous.

About the Author

Doris A. Graber is professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has written numerous articles and books on political communication topics including *Verbal Behavior and Politics* (1976), *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide* (1993), *Public Sector Communication: How Organizations Manage Information* (1992), and *Mass Media and American Politics*, 5th ed. (1996). Her forthcoming book, *Virtual Political Reality: Learning About Politics in the Audio-Visual Age*, analyzes the political impact potential of audio-visuals in news broadcasts.